

## A Survivors Letter

By Cecil Hammett

“C-e-c-i-l H-a-m-m-e-t-t. Middle initial: E. DOB: 05/08/99. Patient number 013559424687. Chemotherapy drug. Dose.” Day after day, for months, I heard those words, followed by nausea, vomiting, and pain from the poison the nurses were injecting into my body. This was my reality, at age 16, fighting pediatric cancer. It burst into my life like a hurricane, ravaging everything in its path. It devastated my family. It left me sick, bald and terrified. Yet I now believe the day I was diagnosed, June 23, 2015, would mark the most significant day of my life. It was the day my carefree childhood ended, but it was also the day I became a fighter, not just for myself, but for others facing the uncertainty of Lymphoma.

It was just one swollen lymph node, until Dr. Kaur, in a cracking, shaky voice said the three words that had the power to kill me -- three words that have the ability to kill 7.6 million people a year -- “You have cancer.” I remember my mind jumping from one thought to the next, “But I just got my driver’s license.” “Will my hair fall out?” “I’m supposed to go to church camp in Sacramento in four days.” “How bad is this?” Can I still be a competitive cheerleader?” “Am I going to die?” In that moment, I wanted to walk out of the doctor’s office, forget what I had heard, and just be Cecil Hammett, a typical teenager whose biggest challenge was deciding what color dress to wear to homecoming. But I wasn’t given that option. Looking back now, would I choose cancer? Of course not, nobody chooses cancer. But would I change who I have become as a result of fighting this battle? Not for a single second. It was when I felt like I was lying in the

ruins of my own body that I truly discovered what courage was. Cancer, chemo, and all its merciless side effects showed me what matters in life. It is not my physical appearance. It is not getting invited to the next social event. It is my faith, the people who love me, and my genuine desire to look at every day as both a gift and an opportunity.

The moment I found hope and joy in my dark and discouraging fight was the moment I turned my experience into a ministry. I was in the ER receiving urgent care for neutropenic fever, and decided to reach out online to other teens with cancer. I knew what these warriors needed to hear because it was the same thing I wanted to hear. Each time my friends told me that my strength in fighting this disease gave them strength to deal with their own problems, medical or otherwise, I realized that my cancer had become so much bigger than an illness; how I dealt with it had the power to change people's lives. In-between hospital visits, I was asked to appear on local television and radio stations, and after my treatment ended, I knew that details of my cancer journey could offer encouragement to others. Today, I do everything I can to spread awareness and raise money for a cure for the Leukemia Lymphoma Society. I delivered keynote addresses for the American Cancer Society, St. Jude Children's Research Hospital Bosom Buddies, and American Cancer Society's Relay for Life. And it doesn't matter if I'm talking in a support group of five or to a crowd of 500, I love to share my story of hope, joy and, yes, thankfulness. It may seem unusual, but in some ways I'm grateful for having faced cancer. It's true that it forced me from childhood to adulthood at what seemed like hypersonic speed, but I honestly believe I'm a better more compassionate version of me for having faced this challenge.